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DECLARATION ON THE STRENGTHENING OF ECONOMIC COOPERATION IN EUROPE

We Governments meet today to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and to pay tribute to its achievements. We affirm its relevance and our commitment to provide it with fresh impetus, so that in concert with other regional and sub-regional organizations, it will be able to take up the challenges which the region faces at the dawn of the 21st century.

Our member countries share common values and aspirations as well as closely linked economic interests. We also share a history marked by phases of tension, *détente* and *rapprochement*. Throughout these developments, the Economic Commission for Europe has succeeded in adapting its work to fulfil faithfully its primary goal of encouraging and strengthening the commitment of all its member countries to harmonious economic relations.

Being part of the United Nations, having a European and transatlantic character as well as a source of economic and technical expertise, the Commission has proved itself a competent and effective forum where all countries, regardless of their size or level of development, can participate in discussions and decision-making on an equal footing.

The Commission has successfully carried out vital tasks of cooperation and integration. By negotiating and harmonizing conventions, norms and standards, it has contributed to preventing and reducing pollution, developing transport infrastructure and diminishing the risk of road accidents,

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facilitating border crossings and simplifying international trade procedures. By drawing up guides for legal reforms and international transaction practices, it has helped the countries in transition to promote trade and investment within the institutional framework of a market economy. By publishing extensive economic analysis and statistics it has encouraged the exchange of views and the sharing of experience, leading to greater mutual understanding and contributing to policy convergence.

This work has yielded tangible results, such as the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution and its protocols; the safety and anti-pollution norms for vehicles; the TIR Convention, eliminating inspection of goods at the frontiers of transit countries; the Agreement on the transport of dangerous goods; and the electronic system EDIFACT to simplify administrative procedures for international trade.

We are pleased that countries outside the region and sometimes the entire international community have applied some of these conventions and norms, and we are convinced that, in its areas of competence, the Commission will continue to be a centre of excellence recognized well beyond the borders of its member countries.

The Commission's work now takes place in an unprecedented historical context, when all its members subscribe to the principles of democracy and the market economy. This major transformation is compounded by underlying trends that affect all the regions of the world: the accelerating liberalization and globalization of the economy, the increasing role of the private sector, the dynamism of regional and sub-regional groupings, the strengthening of individual freedoms and civil society, but also the dangers of marginalization and fragmentation.

In this context it is essential to foster forms of cooperation that promote economic prosperity for all member countries and respond to the needs of an increasingly interdependent world economy. This cooperation forges greater cohesion within the ECE region and contributes to bridging gaps between its sub-regions. We are convinced that the Commission has all the assets to render such a service in the future, just as it has done in the past. This is what has led us to reflect deeply on its strategic directions, defining activities which need to be dealt with in a multilateral framework and for which the ECE is the appropriate forum. We have done so, paying particular attention to the countries in transition and their economic relations with the Commission's other member countries, to changes in the region's institutional landscape, such as the development of the European Union, and to the ongoing reform of the United Nations.

The reform of the Commission, which is outlined in the Plan of Action annexed to this Declaration, meets the threefold aims of focus, flexibility and efficiency.

With regard to the first aim, activities have been discontinued, streamlined or strengthened. Accordingly, we have decided to reduce the number of programme elements by 60% and the intergovernmental structure from fourteen Principal Subsidiary Bodies to seven. These efforts have resulted in

identifying the following current areas of work of the Commission: environment; transport; statistics; trade, industry and enterprise development; economic analysis; energy; timber; and human settlements.

Our concern that the Commission should always be able to respond optimally to its members' needs has led us to introduce greater flexibility in its working methods. Consequently, we have decided to set up a consultative mechanism which will enable some activities to be discontinued and new ones to be launched in response to changes in the needs of member countries and in the realities of the region. We have also agreed on a structure for organizing activities to meet specific requests from sub-groups of member countries, in particular the countries in transition and the Mediterranean countries of the ECE.

Finally, the reform is guided by a desire for efficiency. We have made the intergovernmental structure of ECE more homogeneous and transparent, thereby simplifying decision-making processes and increasing the cost-effectiveness of ECE activities. In order to build upon proven advantages and to avoid duplication, we have decided to enhance cooperation with other regional and subregional organizations, such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and OECD, as well as with institutions, in particular the European Commission. Similarly, we have decided to intensify the dialogue with the business community and civil society, both to benefit from their views and experiences and to broaden the impact of ECE work.

We are committed to applying this reform in all its strategic orientations and, thus, to strengthening the Commission as an instrument for economic cooperation, peace and stability in the ECE region.

Our decisions are fully in line with the current process of rationalizing the United Nations as a whole and of redefining its role and its programmes. By accepting this responsibility for the Economic Commission for Europe, we, its member Governments, are expressing our determination to contribute to the efforts being made by the entire international community to ensure that the Organization enters the 21st century with renewed strength, relevance, efficiency and credibility.